

CHRIST IN OUR HOME

Light for Today



July, August, September 2004

On the cover

As we continue in the season after Pentecost, we grow in our understanding of what it means to follow Jesus, as individuals and as congregations. As you view the cover art, consider these words from the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* (Article VII):

The church is not only an association of external ties and rites like other civic organizations, but it is principally an association of faith and the Holy Spirit in the hearts of persons. It nevertheless has its external marks so that it can be recognized, namely, the pure teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments in harmony with the gospel of Christ. —*The Book of Concord* (Fortress Press, 2000), p. 174.

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July, August, September 2004

Volume 51, Number 3

Rebecca Grothe, Gloria E. Bengtson,
and James Satter, editors

The Scripture readings for this quarter follow the Revised Common Lectionary, Series C. In addition, texts specific to commemorations and festivals are used when appropriate. For more information about the commemorations included in these devotions, see *Festivals and Commemorations* by P. Pfatteicher, or *Sundays and Seasons: Worship Planning Guide*. Both are available through Augsburg Fortress: 1-800-328-4648.

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Festivals and Commemorations

Bold type indicates a lesser festival. Plain type indicates a commemoration.

Date	Festival/Commemoration
July 1	Catherine Winkworth, 1878; John Mason Neale, 1866; hymnwriters
July 6	Jan Hus, martyr, 1415
July 11	Benedict of Nursia, Abbot of Monte Cassino, c. 540
July 12	Nathan Söderblom, Archbishop of Uppsala, 1931
July 15	Vladimir, 1st Christian ruler of Russia, 1015; Olga, confessor, 969
July 17	Bartolomé de Las Casas, missionary to the Indies, 1566
July 22	St. Mary Magdalene
July 23	Birgitta of Sweden, 1373
July 25	St. James the Elder, Apostle
July 28	Heinrich Schütz, 1672; Johann Sebastian Bach, 1750; George Frederick Handel, 1759; musicians
July 29	Mary, Martha, and Lazarus of Bethany; Olaf, King of Norway, martyr, 1030
August 10	Lawrence, deacon, martyr, 258
August 13	Florence Nightingale, 1910; Clara Maass, 1901; renewers of society
August 15	Mary, Mother of Our Lord
August 20	Bernard, Abbot of Clairvaux, 1153
August 24	St. Bartholomew, Apostle
August 28	Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, 430
August 31	John Bunyan, teacher, author, 1688
September 2	Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig, Bishop, renewer of the Church, 1872
September 4	Albert Schweitzer, missionary to Africa, 1965
September 13	John Chrysostom, Bishop of Constantinople, 407
September 14	Holy Cross Day
September 18	Dag Hammarskjöld, peacemaker, 1961
September 21	St. Matthew, Apostle and Evangelist
September 25	Sergius of Radonezh, Abbot of Holy Trinity, Moscow, 1392
September 29	St. Michael and All Angels
September 30	Jerome, translator of the Vulgate, teacher, 420

Awesome deeds

Come and see what God has done. (v. 5)

Our granddaughter called out, "Come and see, Grandma! Come and see my clarinet." Excitedly, she placed the case on the kitchen table and opened it. Nestled in the soft fabric was a shiny, new clarinet.

"Have you learned to play it?" I asked.

"Yes, Grandma! And I want to surprise Mom and play 'Happy Birthday' when she opens her gifts."

Later, as we gathered together in the living room, I set up a makeshift music stand as Lindsey assembled her clarinet. With a flourish, I announced, "We shall now sing 'Happy Birthday to Mom,' accompanied by Lindsey!" We sang as Lindsey played. Tears of pride flowed from my eyes as well as our daughter's.

Afterward, as we gathered around the dining room table, Lindsey whispered in my ear, "I learned our table grace, too." We bowed our heads as the melody began: "Be present at our table, Lord."

Yes, our loved ones' deeds are awesome to us. But these pale when compared to God's awesome deeds in our lives and the lives of all God's children. Come and see what God has done!

Thank you, God, for your awesome deeds and for those who guide us to sing praise to you. Amen

Prayer concern: Musicians of all ages

A painless delivery

Before she was in labor she gave birth. (v. 7)

"Bill, wake up! My water broke! We need to call the doctor." On the way to the hospital, Bill turned on the radio as a distraction, and I could feel slight labor pains every time a new tune played.

In the labor room, I heard women moaning in pain. I wondered how long it would be before my own labor pains would get that severe. Before I could ask, I was wheeled into the delivery room. Within minutes, I gave birth to our son. When the doctor greeted Bill with the news, he said, "Barbara had such an easy delivery—maybe you should have one a year!"

Easy delivery or not, I can't imagine giving birth before the labor pains. "Before she was in labor she gave birth," speaks Isaiah. This is incredible because the prophet is talking about the rebirth of a whole nation, a process that humans struggle with for years. Isaiah describes God as the one who is able to deliver the children of Zion in such a miraculous manner.

In the labor room, before my labor hardly began, I delivered our son. Likewise, God promises to deliver each one of us from pain and separation, giving us new life in God's eternal kingdom.

Thank you, O God, for delivering me safely into your kingdom, through your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen

Prayer concern: Women about to give birth

A slip

My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression ...
restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. (v. 1)

When I entered the Alcoholics Anonymous meeting I was to lead, I noticed a young woman leaving. "Mary," I called after her. "How are you?" She turned and looked at me. Her hair was a mess, and tears were streaming down her cheeks. As I embraced her, I could smell alcohol.

"Oh," she sobbed. "I drank last night, I drank a lot. I'm so ashamed. I just can't face the other members."

"Sure you can, Mary. You've taken the first step—you're here!"

Others came and greeted Mary. When our meeting opened, Mary was the first to speak. "Hi, I'm Mary, and I'm an alcoholic."

"Hi, Mary," the group responded. "Welcome back."

In AA, the acronym SLIP stands for "Sobriety Loses Its Priority." A person who *slips* drinks again. But, like those whom Paul encourages to "restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness," AA welcomes back a person who has slipped. The rest of us know we are only one drink away from a slip.

**Be gracious to me, O Lord. Strengthen me to
reach out to others in your spirit of gentleness. Amen**

Prayer concern: All who suffer from addiction

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals. (v. 4)

My husband reminds me to “travel light” every time we pack for a trip. Bill served in the Navy, and I’m amazed how he can get everything he needs into one suitcase and a small travel bag. That’s our goal when we travel—no more than two bags. Yes, Bill is the “packer” in our family.

As I was packing for a short trip, I heard a TV interview with a woman who was struggling to pack as she prepared to leave her home that was threatened by a forest fire. As the camera zoomed in, she looked at the distant fire. She wiped tears from her eyes and shook her head. “What should I take? What should I try to save?” As she spoke, she extended two empty hands and sobbed.

As I turned away from the TV, I focused again on the bag I was packing. I remembered Bill’s advice and packed lightly. When I placed my Bible in the bag, I set a cross on top of it. Yes, I have everything I need, and it fits into one small suitcase with room to spare!

**Help me travel lightly through life, Lord,
so I can be more alert to the needs of others. Amen**
Prayer concern: Those who must flee their homes

My encourager

I am longing to see you ... so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. (vv. 11-12)

Have you ever felt that life was not worth living? I have. I'd been depressed for a long time, and my family was at a loss to know how to help me. I didn't want to go anywhere, and I didn't want to see anyone. I took medication, but I wasn't doing my part to rise out of the doldrums. I'd wear the same old pants and shirt every day, and lie on the couch watching soap operas.

One day there was a knock on my door. It was my best friend, Marilyn. She marched in, put her hand on her hip, and said, "Go into that bedroom, change clothes, and come with me."

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"We're going to the chaplain's office at the hospital. You are going to learn how to deliver mail to the patients."

I couldn't think of a good excuse—and besides, I would not have dared to argue with Marilyn. She was on a mission! So I went into the bedroom, changed clothes, and sheepishly followed her out the door. That day marked the beginning of a full recovery. I am forever grateful to Marilyn, my encourager and friend.

**Loving God, guide me to be a faithful friend to
those in need of encouragement. Amen**

Prayer concern: All who suffer from mental illnesses

God disclosed in nature

Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. (v. 20)

While I was walking with a friend along a county road in rural Minnesota, a shrill screech interrupted our conversation. We turned toward the sound and saw a bird nearby—squawking at us and hopping to and fro on one foot. “Whatever is wrong with that bird?” I asked.

“Let’s get out of her sight,” whispered my friend. “That bird is a killdeer, and she probably has a nest in the rocks over there. A mother killdeer draws attention to herself to protect her eggs from predators. By feigning injury, she offers herself as prey.”

“We must look like predators to her,” I exclaimed. And sure enough, as soon as we were out of the bird’s sight, the screeching stopped.

God created the mother killdeer to act in this fashion to protect her young. God has endowed each creature with mechanisms for protection. Unlike the killdeer, however, God does not feign injury to save us; God’s own Son died for our salvation. That’s truly something to sing about!

Loving Creator, help to me see you

in the beauty and majesty of nature. Amen

Prayer concern: Those who care for creation

Look for the good

**In passing judgment on another
you condemn yourself. (2:1)**

“It takes one to know one.” “The pot calls the kettle black.” These clichés echo the apostle Paul’s point that we often criticize in others the very things that we ourselves say or do.

When I first met my best friend, we did not like each other. Why? We are too much alike. Both of us like to talk, and we both have strong leadership skills. Our pastor told us that our conversations sounded like verbal sparring matches and suggested we sit down over coffee and figure out how to improve our strained relationship.

This taught me a good lesson. When I meet someone for the first time, I try not to form an opinion. If I am uncomfortable with a person, I ask myself, “What behavior in me do I find offensive in this person?”

A Roman proverb said that every man carries two sacks—one in front for his neighbor’s faults and one behind for his own. Jesus brought this out when he asked, “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?” (Matthew 7:3).

**Forgive me, Lord, when I put others down.
Help me to love as you have first loved me. Amen**

Prayer concern: All who seek reconciliation

The cross

**The LORD ... leads the humble in what is right,
and teaches the humble his way. (vv. 8-9)**

In the church of my childhood, an eight-foot-tall red cross stood between the pulpit and the lectern during Lent. The cross was ablaze with candles along its outer edges. All other lights in the sanctuary were turned off, and the pastor would speak from behind the cross. As I snuggled next to Mom or Dad, I often thought, "Jesus, why did you die such a horrible death? You are God! Couldn't you jump down from the cross and get even with all those people who jeered or double-crossed you?"

Many familiar phrases seem to sum up the way the world works, including "Do anything to get ahead," "Look out for Number One," and "The end justifies the means." But that's not the way God intended it to be. So God taught us a new way through Jesus. Although he was God, Jesus died on a cross for you and for me. He bore your sins and mine.

I couldn't grasp this concept as a young child. And at times I still find it difficult to believe. I guess that's why we call it the good news.

Thank you, God, for your great love and mercy. Help me to experience, believe, and share your word. Amen

Prayer concern: Those experiencing doubt

Keep it simple

Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. (v. 11)

Moses tells the Israelites to “keep it simple,” because they insist on making a relationship with God sound like a difficult process. Moses instructs the Israelites to look around and see that the way to a right relationship with God is right under their noses.

It’s as if Moses says to them, and to us, “You don’t have to do the impossible; you don’t have to swim oceans or ascend into heaven. Just understand, believe, and obey the word that God has given to you. Don’t look at what you do, look at what God has done. Look at the blessings that God offers when we turn to the Lord with all our hearts and with all our souls. Is this so hard to believe?”

In Romans 10:8, Paul offers similar words: “The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart.” Paul says that if we confess with our lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in our hearts that God raised him from the dead, we will be saved. Faith is a gift. Salvation is a gift. It doesn’t get much simpler than that.

**O God, when I worry about what I must do,
help me to remember what you have done. Amen**

Prayer concern: Those who are too busy
to see God at work

Saved by the light

[God] has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son. (v. 13)

Winter nights in northern Minnesota get pretty dark when clouds hide the moon and the stars. One evening shortly after moving to this area, I decided to walk to a friend's house. "It's too dark to walk without a flashlight," my husband advised.

So I rode with him to the end of our road. "I'll be OK walking from here," I said as I got out of the car.

As his taillights disappeared, I realized how dark it really was. I managed to find the road to my friend's house, but as I plodded on I realized that I wasn't sure where I was. At one point I drifted too far to the right and stumbled on the berm. "Oh, God," I prayed. "Please help me. I'm so frightened."

I felt my feet going up an incline. When I reached the top, I saw my friend's porch light in the distance. How grateful I was! I stumbled in the night because I was too stubborn to listen to the words of those who were familiar with the area. I was rescued by the porch light. In the same way, Christ's light rescues us from the dim paths of failed relationships, broken promises, and so much more.

**Bathe away the gloom in my soul, O God,
with the rays of Christ's light and life. Amen**

Prayer concern: Electricians

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers? (v. 36)

The parable of the good Samaritan is so familiar that people routinely describe a person who helps a stranger as a “good Samaritan,” without giving much thought to what it meant to be a Samaritan in Jesus’ day. In that time, *good* was not a word that most Jews would have used to describe members of the religious sect in Samaria commonly called Samaritans—people who shared a common heritage with the Jews but who differed in their traditions and rituals. Most Jews considered the Samaritans to be foreigners, and mutual animosities led both groups to avoid one another.

Jesus offers a glimpse of the reversals in God’s realm in his story: Powerful members of society (the lawyer) are humbled, and those considered outcasts (the Samaritan) are lifted up. Jesus presents the Samaritan as the one who fulfills God’s command that we love one another. The story continues in Acts 8:4-17, when the apostles travel from Jerusalem to Samaria and welcome the believers there into the body of Christ.

Gracious God, open my heart to welcome others into the body of Christ. Amen

Prayer concern: Those who feel excluded from the church

Last of all

Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs. (v. 14)

The boys next door often come over after school, ring the doorbell, and ask, "Can Bill come out and play?" Bill is my retired husband, and he rarely turns down their requests.

Jesus also loved children. Yet during the time of Jesus, children had almost no status and few rights. Many adults considered children gifts of God who would not be useful until they got older. But Jesus taught an important lesson. In the kingdom of heaven, people who think they are on the top of the heap are in for a big surprise.

Jesus speaks of children in today's verses, referring to all the "little ones" in this world who have no status, no influence, and no income. In the kingdom of God, the most unlikely people are most likely to be agents of God's word.

If you want to glimpse life in God's realm, go find a child or a person who is considered unimportant by the rest of society. Put your arm around her or him and say hello to God.

**Mighty God, guide me to seek your kingdom in
the faces of your precious children. Amen**

Prayer concern: Children who live in dangerous places

Father Abraham

Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. (v. 3)

Our Sunday school kids love to sing about Abraham: "Father Abraham has many friends, many friends has Father Abraham. I am one of them, and so are you! So, let's all praise the Lord!" The children go through the motions with vigor and joy.

After Christ's ascension, his followers reinterpreted the mission of Abraham, who is mentioned numerous times in the New Testament. For the apostle Paul, the life of Abraham proved that faith is more important to salvation than the law of Moses, for Abraham believed in God before he was ordered to undergo the ritual of circumcision. Paul believed that Jesus' ministry makes it possible for us to recapture the early faith of Abraham. In other words, God does not require people to follow certain religious laws in order to be considered righteous. God's covenant with Abraham was not because he was especially obedient. Rather, Abraham's relationship with God was based on faith alone. In Paul's view, therefore, Abraham is the father of all those who have faith in God. Those who have faith are—each and every one—God's chosen.

**O God, give me the faith, wisdom,
and strength to trust in you above all else. Amen**

Prayer concern: Sunday school leaders and learners

Monkeys and cats

Now the words “it was reckoned to him,” were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. (vv. 23-24)

How we view our faith in God might be described in two ways: “monkey-hold” or “cat-hold.” When a mother monkey sees her baby in distress, she dashes to the baby and turns her back so that the young one can leap on and hold tight as the mother races to safety. When a mother cat sees her baby in distress, she dashes to the kitten, grasps the back of the kitten’s neck in her mouth, and carries it off to safety. The baby monkey must cooperate in the rescue mission by leaping onto the mother’s back. The rescue of the baby cat is all up to the mother.

In this passage, Paul tells us that if Abraham were justified by works (cooperating in a monkey-hold rescue), he had something to boast about, but Abraham trusted God to do what God promised. Abraham had faith that God would grasp him in a “cat-hold.” Abraham’s faith was reckoned to him as righteousness, and this was “not for his sake alone, but for ours also.”

God’s word is trustworthy. God’s steadfast love is our hope. Let us rejoice and be glad in this!

**Faithful God, thank you for rescuing me
from sin, death, and the power of the devil. Amen**
Prayer concern: Those who struggle to trust God

The landlord

**O LORD, who may abide in your tent?
Who may dwell on your holy hill? (v. 1)**

When I was a girl, my friend and I liked to make tents in our backyard. Mom and Dad would put an old blanket over a clothesline and anchor the corners. My girlfriend and I would huddle in our tent, talking and giggling until the mosquitoes or night noises drove us to the safety of the house.

In King David's time, the homes of the Israelites often were tents. Psalm 15, which is attributed to David, speaks of coming into God's presence in the sanctuary and "abiding" in God's tent. This psalm says that only those who do what is right, who speak the truth, and who do their neighbors no wrong may abide in God's tent.

I wonder if David's landlord was different from the apostle Paul's. In Ephesians 2:8, Paul says that our entry into God's presence depends on God, not on us: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God."

Jesus makes it possible for each person to come into God's presence. Jesus fulfills all requirements for us and welcomes us to enter the tent.

**God, strengthen my faith and welcome me into
the shelter of your love. Amen**

Prayer concern: Those without shelter this day

Unexpected company

**Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said,
“Make ready quickly three measure of choice
flour, knead it, and make cakes.” (v. 6)**

I'm sure that Sarah was used to being hospitable. But on this particular day, when she observed three men talking to Abraham, I wonder if she might have said to herself, "I've just finished cleaning the tent. I hope Abraham doesn't invite them to dinner.... Oh, oh, here comes Abraham, and he's in a hurry."

"Sarah, please hurry!" Abraham might have commanded. "Take three cups of our best flour, mix it up quickly, knead it, and make some cakes for our guests."

I wonder if Sarah sighed and mumbled under her breath, "As if I've never baked cakes before! Since when did he become a culinary expert?"

After the cakes were baked and served, Sarah overheard from the tent door the promise of an heir: "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." Did she recall the promise made to Abraham long ago, the promise that she thought God had forgotten?

"Could it be?" Sarah might have pondered. "Maybe God does have more in mind for me!"

**Open my eyes to new possibilities
in your wonderful world, O God. Amen**

Prayer concern: Those who hope to become parents

An impossible balancing act

In him all things hold together. (v. 17)

On a recent vacation, my wife and I visited the Chinese Pavilion at the Epcot Center in Orlando, Florida. Here we observed a troupe of acrobats perform astounding feats of dexterity. One acrobat in particular caught our attention. This young woman held two long poles in each hand, with spinning dinner plates on top of each pole. She climbed a 10-foot ladder to a tightrope and walked across. You guessed it. She kept the plates spinning the whole time. Incredible!

Well, few of us are acrobats, but we certainly know what it's like to try balancing all of the responsibilities and worries in our lives. When things seem under control, more "plates" seem to appear like magic—and a crash seems inevitable. What is the balance point in life anyway? A better question might be "Who is the balance point?" or "Who holds it all together?"

Paul reminds all of us who are "spinning plates" that only in Christ do "all things hold together." And God is pleased to reconcile/balance all things "by making peace through the blood of his cross" (v. 20).

**Lord God, I am your exhausted and anxious child.
Keep me steadfast in faith—balanced and strengthened
through your cross of love. Amen**

Prayer concern: Those overwhelmed by worry

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

There is need of only one thing. (v. 42)

Our congregation is in the midst of a building program. Perhaps you know the stress that accompanies these efforts—rain delays, cost overruns, and building permits. Meanwhile, existing ministries must be maintained, while members of the congregation become testy with each other.

Eventually the last straw falls ... like when the parking lot becomes a muddy swamp! Somebody do something! Here comes four-year-old Jenny to the rescue—her hands, arms, knees, and church dress covered in mud. Jenny exclaims, “Pastor, pastor, see this rock I picked up outside? It looks just like Jesus’ cross! We need to show all the people!” Jenny’s right. We need to do that.

In our text, Martha was so distracted by the task of preparing for Jesus’ visit that she forgot that Jesus was already there. And it didn’t help matters that Martha’s sister, Mary, was giving her no assistance at all. Jesus reminded Martha—and us—that the only thing truly needed is his presence. Thank God for the people like Jenny in our midst.

**In the midst of my busy-ness, O Lord,
send me a reminder of your forever presence. Amen**

Prayer concern: Those who are unable to
see Jesus in their midst

Courage to speak

Let me take it upon myself to speak to the LORD. (v. 27)

Whether it was winter or summer, indoors or outdoors, "Papa John," as we called him, always wore a red hunting cap with the flaps pulled down over his ears. He marched in every parade, always out of step. He sat in the front row at every high school basketball game—always cheering at the wrong time. He was developmentally disabled, and we laughed at him.

But John always returned our ridicule with a wave and a smile. He died a few years ago ... alone. I never spoke up for John. I never asked forgiveness. I still experience the guilt. It is likely that each of us has painful memories of failing to speak up when we have seen someone being ridiculed, ignored, or oppressed.

Abraham had the courage to speak up, even to God, when he heard of God's intention to wipe out the communities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Even though he was "but dust and ashes" (v. 27), Abraham had enough faith in God's righteousness to bargain with boldness for the lives of the faithful remnant in those sinful cities.

Who today has the courage to speak, even to God, on behalf of others? May the courage from the cross send us into action.

Grant me courage, God, to speak for those who are pushed aside and forgotten in our world. Amen

Prayer concern: Those who speak out for justice

A taste of reality

But the substance belongs to Christ. (v. 17)

In my ministry as a seminary professor, I serve as guest pastor in a wide variety of Lutheran congregations. I make it a point to arrive early so someone can walk me through the pattern of worship that is typical for that particular parish: Where do I stand? Who reads the lessons? What is the method of distributing Holy Communion? In one parish, in response to my questions, the president of the congregation interrupted impatiently, "Pastor, you should know all this! We do communion the regular Lutheran way!"

Well, "regular" Lutherans use wafers or bread, wine or juice (sometimes both), plastic or glass cups, and pouring or drinking chalices. They stand or kneel. Distribution is continuous or at "tables." They commune unconfirmed children or only confirmed adults. Sometimes there is a communion assistant, and sometimes not.

So what is the Lutheran way? What is the real substance that belongs to Christ? That's easy. In Christ's own words: "This is my body, given for you. This is my blood, shed for you." This presence of Christ is truly a taste of reality, yet just a foretaste of the feast to come.

**Thank you, O Christ, for giving
yourself to us in Holy Communion. Amen**

Prayer concern: Those longing for Christ's presence

It's Pray Day!

Lord, teach us to pray. (v. 1)

Grandmother was using a calendar to teach three-year-old Laura the days of the week. Laura correctly identified each day as her grandmother pointed to it—except for the first day of the week. They repeated the names over and over, but Laura just couldn't remember the name of the first day. Exasperated, Grandmother folded her hands on the kitchen table and sighed, "Oh my heavens, Laura."

Then Laura exclaimed, "Now I know, Grandma. It's Pray Day!" Right on, Laura. And every other day is a pray day, too.

Prayer is at the heart of our daily lives. It is a time of seeking and asking; searching and thanking; praising and listening; crying and sighing. Prayer is a time of intimacy at the feet of our loving Savior. Each of us has experienced periods of emptiness, when we could not find the right words to express our thoughts. Jesus provided his disciples, and us, with a prayer that gathers all of our yearnings and offers them God.

Each day this week, meditate on one petition of the Lord's Prayer. Read Luther's explanation of each one in the Small Catechism. The Holy Spirit will show you that each day is "Pray Day."

Lord, teach me to pray ... please. Amen

Prayer concern: Confirmation leaders and learners

Seeing, believing, sharing

I have seen the Lord. (v. 18)

Tracy was a frequent patient in the hospital emergency room. Sometimes she was brought in by ambulance. Other times the police brought her in for psychiatric evaluation. During each visit, Tracy would announce, "I saw Jesus today." Well, you can guess everyone's reaction. But one night, as Tracy made her proclamation, a medical resident noticed that Tracy was lying on a gurney parked at the open door of the hospital chapel. When the physician talked with Tracy, she could see the altar, the cross, and the outstretched arms of Jesus highlighted by a spotlight in the darkened chapel interior. Wow!

In the midst of her tears at the empty tomb, Mary Magdalene first thought Jesus was the gardener. As she poured out her grief and her desire—to honor the body of the crucified Jesus—our risen Savior called her name. Immediately, Mary recognized the Lord and shared this good news. God invites us to share our deepest fears and worries with Christ and with others in the body of Christ. In the midst of our sharing, the resurrected Jesus calls our name. Jesus is indeed with us. Thanks, Mary.

Risen Lord, give me the courage to share my fears with you. Let me see you in the midst of my grief. Amen

Prayer concern: Those who grieve

What will people think?

In you I take refuge. (v. 1)

Someone once said that Lutherans actually are taught 11 commandments, and that the 11th commandment is a question: "What will people think?" This isn't far off the mark, at least not for me, especially when it comes to reacting to criticism and hostility from others. I tend to keep my feelings to myself, even when I know the criticism is unjustified. I want people to like me, so I keep my anger bottled up inside. Maybe you do the same thing.

Then we read this psalm. The writer certainly felt unjustly surrounded by hostile forces: "Like a lion they will tear me apart; they will drag me away, with no one to rescue" (v. 2). I know this feeling. Do you?

And the psalmist knows that alone he can do nothing; he needs God's shield of protection. As he pours out his fear and anger to God, this ancient worshiper also remembers that God is his refuge in all times of trouble, no matter what other people may threaten. Thanks be to God, our refuge. We need to be reminded once in a while.

**O God, my refuge and strength,
be my shield when I feel threatened. Amen**

Prayer concern: Those who feel threatened
by forces beyond their control

Alone in silence

And after the fire, a sound of sheer silence. (v. 12)

Do you ever feel alone—that no one understands you or that no one seems to care about you or what you hold dear? Has it ever seemed like just when your life is going well that everything comes tumbling down?

This is what happened to Elijah after he won a major victory over the prophets of Baal. This event humiliated King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, who had been permitting pagan worship. As a result, they threatened to kill Elijah, who had to flee for his life.

Discouraged and despairing, Elijah complained to God: “I alone am left, and they are seeking my life” (v. 10). Elijah had been faithful and look what happened to him! Elijah looked for God’s presence in a strong wind, an earthquake, and a blazing fire, but God was not there. Instead, God gave him a sound of sheer silence. And God was there ... in the silence.

This is where God meets us, too. When there is nothing more we can do or say, when we have poured out our fears, God is there in the center of our silence. In the deep silence of our souls, God whispers to us, “Go, I am with you always.”

**Dear God, come to me in my times of despair
and fill me with confidence of your presence. Amen**
Prayer concern: Those persecuted for their faith

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (v. 45)

Have you ever noticed what happens to sports fans at an athletic event when TV cameras are focused on them? More times than not, they start jumping around, pointing their index fingers skyward, and screaming, "We're Number One!" This happens no matter how poorly their team is playing. It's human nature. We all want to be Number One. We all want to be special.

James and John were no different. They, too, got caught up in the excitement of the moment. They were on their way to Jerusalem with Jesus, where thousands of Jews were gathered to celebrate the feast of Passover. The Messiah was expected to be there, and James and John had a pretty good hunch that Jesus was that Messiah. So why shouldn't they ask for the power seats beside Jesus in God's new kingdom?

But they learned that God's kingdom wasn't all about them, and it isn't all about us either. God's new realm was, is, and will always be about Jesus, who gave his life serving others. Jesus also invites us to serve with him in God's realm now and in the time to come.

Let me be your servant, Lord.

Let your will, not mine, be done to your glory. Amen

Prayer concern: Those struggling with
self-centeredness

Soul sighs

**That very Spirit intercedes with sighs
too deep for words. (v. 26)**

The hurricane warnings were up, and the pastor faithfully checked in with her parishioners to make certain they were able to make the necessary preparations. Only after the elderly and homebound were cared for did the pastor begin to place sheets of plywood over the doors and windows of her own home. Of course, she did not ask for help. While attempting to cover a large window, she fell from the top step of a ladder, crashing headfirst onto the brick patio below. Five hours later, she returned from the emergency room with a mild concussion and 43 stitches in her chin and forehead. Try telling this pastor that all things work together for those who love the Lord.

While it may not have been a hurricane, each one of us has had times when life's events have left us battered, bruised, and confused ... times when we did not even have the energy to pray. These are times for sighing deep within our souls. These are times when the Spirit takes over and lets our very "soul sighs" become prayers. God hears. God loves.

**O God, you hear when I cry with a sigh, and you
answer me with your love. Thank you. Amen**

Prayer concern: Victims of tragedies

A hole in the soul

**In all these things we are more than conquerors
through him who loved us. (v. 37)**

Our adult Sunday school class was discussing loss and grief. One usually quiet member described the death of his father as leaving "a hole in my heart that can never again be filled. After all these years, there is still an empty space deep inside." Other members found this perspective helpful for sharing their own grief stories.

As we approached the end of the class, I asked participants to ponder how God had been present with us during our sharing. One member of the class exclaimed, "You know, grief doesn't just leave a hole in our hearts. The loss of a loved one leaves a hole in our souls. And yet at the center is the cross."

The cross of Christ is at the center of the soul pain of grief. As we remember the suffering of Christ for us and with us, God surrounds us with the company of saints who have gone before us and the company of saints in our midst today. God reminds us that Christ has made us "more than conquerors" of whatever burdens we bear. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

**In the midst of soul pain, O God,
we remember your Son, whose death and
resurrection gather us in you. Amen**

Prayer concern: Those separated from loved ones

Promises, promises, promises

**The children of the promise are counted
as descendants. (v. 8)**

We all have made promises in good faith. Yet most of us have not been able to keep every promise we have made. Certainly, we all have been disappointed victims of promises broken by others: "I'll pick you up right after work, I promise." "I'll be home in time for dinner, I promise." "I will never let you down, I promise." The list goes on and on. Promises made; promises broken. Sin abounds, and we are in bondage to it.

God keeps promises, no matter what. That is a certain fact. The Israelites often failed to keep God's laws and broke their promises to God. Nevertheless, God continued to keep a relationship with them as God's own children. God continued to show mercy even when they broke their own good faith promises to God.

In Christ, God extends the promise of love and mercy beyond Israel to include each one of us. God welcomes all baptized people into the body of Christ —forever. Broken promises from human mouths abound, but God's promise of eternal life and mercy lasts forever. Count on it!

**Almighty God, thank you for keeping your word as you
welcome me into your loving arms of mercy. Amen**

Prayer concern: Those in despair because of
broken promises

Pomp and Circumstance

Mortals cannot abide in their pomp. (v. 12)

Most of us have witnessed at least one graduation ceremony this year, either on TV or in person. From nursery school through the highest level of professional education, participants march proudly to Edward Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance*.

All too often, after glorious rituals of endless possibilities, the harsh realities of life quickly emerge. Graduates soon discover that life is unfair. Cheating and conniving for success seem to be the norm. Many adults flaunt success with fancy cars; expensive vacations and designer clothes become their symbols of excellence. Success comes at the expense of others.

The psalmist reminds us that this view of success is not faithful. There is no lasting meaning in the accumulation of abundant wealth. Death comes to each person, and "fool and dolt perish together" (v. 10).

Pomp. It looks good all right, but it does not make for lasting meaning in life. No amount of money or possessions can purchase the meaning that lasts forever. In Christ, God has already done that for us and for all of God's children. The ransom has been paid.

**Eternal Savior, thanks for paying the ransom
for our lives, so that we may be yours forever. Amen**

Prayer concern: Those who pursue abundance
at the expense of others

Windbags or wind chimes?

All is vanity and a chasing after wind. (v. 14)

I like the book of Ecclesiastes. The author seems to understand my own whirlwind of obligations that never seem to end. Sometimes it seems as if my life reflects an old Pennsylvania Dutch saying: "The hurrier I go, the behinder I get." And then the words of Ecclesiastes call me back to reality. All the "busy work" that fills my days is often as empty as vapor (vanity)—barely visible and fleeting in importance. It's here today, gone and forgotten by tomorrow.

Thanks, Good Teacher, for reminding us that all too often the "busy-ness" of our lives does not fill the empty spaces, the yearning spaces deep down in the depths of our souls. Chasing after the wind makes us "windbags," inflated with self-importance and deflated by the smallest problems.

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word *ruach* can mean "wind," "breath," or "spirit." God's Spirit refreshes, transforms, and invites us to be "wind chimes," reflecting the beauty and harmony of Jesus Christ, the center of meaning. Can't you just feel the breeze?

Come, Holy Spirit, and fill my soul with your refreshing presence, that I may share it with others. Amen

Prayer concern: Those who yearn for rest

Up, up, and away

Set your minds on things that are above. (v. 2a)

Are you old enough to remember listening to the Superman radio show? I still recall how the introduction to each program began with "Faster than a speeding bullet," then climaxed with Superman exclaiming, "Up, up, and away!"

Each episode, newspaper reporter Clark Kent would hear of some impending calamity. You know what happened next. Off came the business suit, leaving the caped "Man of Steel" ready to fly off to rescue someone in harm's way.

Wouldn't you love to be able to do that just once? But when I try to fly like Superman, I usually wind up feeling like a sparrow caught in a hurricane.

Paul invites us to soar. However, Paul is referring to the focus of our minds, the way we see reality. As Christians, God gives us a cross-shaped lens for viewing life in a soaring new way. Our bondage to the troubles in this world is over. Christ died and rose again and is seated at God's right hand. We are invited to soar with him in glory ... up, up, and away!

Thank you, Lord, for inviting me to soar

with you beyond the troubles of this day. Amen

Prayer concern: Those who feel trapped by prejudice

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

**One's life does not consist in
the abundance of possessions. (v. 15)**

I love yard sales, and I have found many treasures amid other people's junk. Such sales can foster positive outcomes—items are recycled, families save money by purchasing these items, sellers earn extra cash, and good-natured socializing takes place.

I must be cautious, though, or a side of me that I don't like emerges. You see, I become competitive at yard sales. I find myself wanting to beat others to the "good stuff." I might grab something I don't need just so someone else can't get it. I may feel gleeful about finding an item priced well below its fair value.

One definition of *greed* is "desiring more than one's share." Jesus didn't forbid ownership, but he did teach that our lives aren't measured by our possessions. It isn't evil to buy and enjoy things—doing so even provides a livelihood for others. But too often we taint the good we receive by selfishness or lack of restraint. We can avoid greed by examining our motives and living in a Christ-like way: "Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33).

**Lord, keep me focused on what
is truly important to possess. Amen**

Prayer concern: Storekeepers

Let God decide

God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. (v. 2)

A young boy whispered in his teacher's ear every morning, "None of the other kids like you, but I do."

How humans strive to ingratiate themselves to people "at the top." Whether by self-promotion or associating with only those who are prominent at work or church, it seems to be human nature to seek to be on the good side of those in power.

In this reading, Paul instructs Christians not to be haughty about their faith, as if they belong to an exclusive club. Paul uses the example of Elijah presuming to tell God, in effect, "None of the other Israelites like you, but I do." Paul admonishes his listeners that belief exists for any of us—Jew or Gentile—only by the gift of God's loving and forgiving grace.

Let's resist the temptation to judge who is or is not acceptable to God. Rather, let's put our energy into practicing the love and acceptance modeled by Christ. In this way, others might feel welcomed by our hospitality and come to know the grace of God.

Welcoming God, thank you for the gift of faith.

**Strengthen me with your Spirit to invite others to come
and know your life-giving grace. Amen**

Prayer concern: Those who haven't heard the good news

A successful project

God has the power to graft them in again. (v. 23)

Famed horticulturist Luther Burbank developed more than 800 varieties of plants by grafting and other methods. Burbank was motivated by a desire to improve the world's food supply, so the multitudes might be better nourished.

In today's reading, Paul concedes that his metaphor of grafting the olive tree actually runs "contrary to nature" (v. 24), so what is his point? Speaking to those who are not Jews, Paul reminds them of their dependence on their "roots," their faith ancestors in Israel's history and the God of Israel. Paul pictures a restored relationship with God as he speaks of branches that have been grafted. And Paul makes it quite clear that Jews and Gentiles alike are completely dependent on God to cut out and to graft in—all people receive new life on God's own terms. God will nourish the multitudes with grace and forgiveness in God's own manner.

As Paul reminds us in many places, there is no room for boasting or judging others in our lives of faith. We are called to give thanks to the Lord, who has grafted us into God's goodness and mercy.

**Creator God, nourish me each day
to trust in your mercy and goodness. Amen**

Prayer concern: Those who suffer from
the judgment of others

It's a mystery

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! (v. 33)

During World War II, Corrie Ten Boom and her family were sent to a concentration camp because they hid Jews from the Nazis. This Dutch woman admonished Christians that the Jews "are the apple of God's eye."

In today's reading, Paul tells the Romans much the same thing as he concludes the section of chapters 9-11 with the verses in our reading today. Paul reaffirms God's impartiality and faithfulness, proclaiming trust that God's judgment and mercy will embrace all human beings on God's own terms.

Many aspects of the human experience are difficult to comprehend, such as hatred, cruelty, suffering, and war. We struggle to understand our own sinfulness. We strive to understand the mystery of God's impartiality and mercy. We seek to know God's plan for us and for all people. Perhaps we can take our cue from Paul, who appeals to the Romans and to us to respond to these puzzles not with jaded skepticism or scorn, but with awe and praise for God, whose ways are far above our limited understanding. Glory to God forever!

Almighty God, thank you for being faithful to your promises made in Jesus Christ. Amen

Prayer concern: Those imprisoned for their beliefs

God is present in our midst

**Truly the eye of the LORD is on those who fear him,
on those who hope in his steadfast love. (v. 18)**

On a train ride, I heard a man behind me conversing with another passenger who had an amazing knowledge of baseball. The visit broke down, however, when the man asked the baseball expert to pray for the terminally ill brother he was traveling to see. The sports aficionado declined, saying he had “no special link” with any faith tradition or with God. My eavesdropping was revealed when I interjected, “I’ll pray for your brother.” The man seemed truly grateful.

Psalm 33 tells us that God looks upon all humankind—that God watches all of the earth’s inhabitants. Whenever I’m in a crowd, I consider how mind-boggling it is that God knows and cares about each individual. I believe the Lord delights in assuring us of God’s presence by bringing together like-minded friends and strangers who can uphold one another in their faith journeys.

My experience on the train is just one example of sensing this presence of God. Perhaps today you can recall an experience of your own when you felt God at work in your midst.

Dear God, thank you for caring about every detail of my life. Help me remember that you are always with me. Amen

Prayer concern: Those who do not know God

A faithful God

**Look toward heaven and count the stars ...
so shall your descendants be. (v. 5)**

My ears perked up when I heard a newscaster say that there are more stars in the universe than grains of sand on all the world's beaches. For me, this news brings to mind God's covenant with Abraham thousands of years ago.

To the elderly Abram (later called Abraham), God's promise that he and wife Sarai (Sarah) would have as many descendants as there are stars in the sky must have seemed nearly unbelievable. Yet Abram believed God's word, and God counted Abram's faith as righteousness before God. Almost as incredible is that when Abram's faith wavered and he decided to "speed up" the process by having a child with Hagar, God did not withdraw the promise or Abram's righteous status.

We, too, believe an incomprehensible thing. We believe Jesus painfully paid the penalty for our sins so we can be reconciled with God. Our belief, like Abraham's, is reckoned to us as righteousness. Even though we, too, have episodes of doubt and at times sinfully take matters into our own hands, God is faithful and does not withdraw the promises of mercy and eternal blessing from us.

Holy Spirit, renew my faith in times of doubt. Amen

Prayer concern: Scientists

Desiring a better country

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out ... not knowing where he was going. (v. 8)

When I lived in the eastern United States, I longed for the western plains, which I call home. Recently, a girl spending the summer in our town in Montana told me with yearning that she couldn't wait to get back to the woods of northern Michigan. It is not easy to leave the land that is one's home.

In our reading from Hebrews, the writer defines *faith*, then chronicles the faith of Abraham, who obeyed God's call to set out for a new land, not even knowing where he was going. Faith wasn't something that just appeared in Abraham when God told him that he and Sarah would have descendants who would be a great nation and a blessing. Faith was a way of life nurtured through Abraham's very existence.

In the Bible, the verb *obeyed* often follows a reference to Abraham. This is a key for us as we consider how faith is strengthened in our own lives. When we obey God's word and are honest to our calling as God's children—desiring the "better country" of God's realm—we live with faith as the center of our existence. Living in faith with God, we are always home.

God of all times and places, open my ears to your word and my heart to your calling. Amen

Prayer concern: Those who are homesick

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

You also must be ready. (v. 37)

In a nearby town there is a restaurant that has great food, complimentary wine, and an owner/cook with an independent attitude. A sign over the door reads, "Lack of planning on your part does not constitute an emergency on mine. The answer is a reservation."

In today's passage, Jesus teaches about living in ready expectancy. It is God's good pleasure to give us the kingdom, but Jesus knows that when we're distracted by accumulating earthly treasures, it's difficult to prepare for life in God's reign. Jesus knows that our hearts follow our treasures, and that this puts us at risk for missing the most important engagement of our lives. Jesus challenges us to be watchful and prepared, seeking only the treasures that are truly important.

At the restaurant mentioned above, the owner loves to surprise her guests at the end of the meal with a box of homemade candy. Her generous spirit reminds me of Paul's description of the feast that Christ has prepared for us: "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Corinthians 2:9).

We have a reservation!

**Generous God, guide my days that I may
be ready to join in your heavenly feast! Amen**

Prayer concern: Cooks and food servers

A plea for justice

**Rise up, O God, judge the earth;
for all the nations belong to you! (v. 9)**

I judged floats in a parade once. The next day I received a call from an angry woman whose club won only second place. She challenged my impartiality. After that heated exchange, I knew I never again wanted the responsibility of judging anything. In the reading for today, the psalmist addresses more important issues of justice. This psalm is a lament about a pervasive system of corruption—the weak and poor have no legal recourse, while the wicked prevail.

We'd like to think that our modern jurisprudence is fair to all, but many people contest this premise. Too often, it seems that those with money and privilege receive easier treatment in the legal system than people who are poor and without high-placed connections. Even the noblest goal, such as a fair court system, deteriorates in the hands of sinful humankind.

The call for justice is a recurring theme in the Bible and in our communities today. God calls us to work for justice by being fair-minded, informed, and compassionate. Only with God, however, are all judgments just, fair, and beyond dispute.

**Rise up, O God, and lead your people in the
work for justice and peace. Amen**

Prayer concern: Judges

It's not a popularity contest

**Let the one who has my word speak
my word faithfully. (v. 28)**

Jeremiah was faithful, if not always eager, in declaring the word of God to the rebellious people in his midst. Jeremiah spoke God's truth even when it was not popular to do so. And he suffered rejection and physical torment at the hands of those to whom God sent him.

In these verses, Jeremiah wrestled with the issue of false prophets. There were those who proclaimed a message from their dreams, a message of assurance that Judah would be spared. This was quite a contrast from Jeremiah's prophecy that Judah would be captured and taken into exile. In the face of these false prophets, God's call to Jeremiah is to persevere in proclaiming the truth, as the false words will reveal themselves in due time.

When have you detected the words of false prophets in your midst? What words of God's truth were you called to proclaim in this situation? God may not call us to tasks as prominent as Jeremiah's, but God does call us to be faithful in sharing God's word, even at the cost of our popularity.

**O God, guide me to share your
truth with faithfulness and love. Amen**

Prayer concern: Those who preach God's word

A happy ending

Let us run with perseverance the race
that is set before us. (12:1)

In the classic children's book *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel*, Mike and his shovel, "Mary Anne," would dig "a little faster and a little better" when they knew people were watching.

In today's passage, the writer of Hebrews recalls dozens of faithful people. Despite trials and persecutions, these ancestors persisted in living in faith. The writer reassures us that these wonderful faith ancestors are a great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us as we journey through life. What a strong message of encouragement! The presence of these witnesses can motivate us to dig "a little faster and a little better" in the routines of our daily lives.

I often wonder what the church will look like in the future. Who will speak God's word? Who will reach out and care for the needs of others? Today's verse reminds me that one day I will be with that great cloud of witnesses, joyfully encouraging God's children as their lives unfold. What a wonderful reason to keep looking to Jesus, "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith" (12:2).

Mighty God, help me lay aside
every sin that clings so closely. Amen
Prayer concern: Our wise elders

Choosing sides

Do you think that I have come to bring peace to earth? (v. 51)

Each Sunday, Jasmine came to church with her friend, Sheri, and sat in the pew with Sheri's family. It was a joy to hear Jasmine's strong voice singing out the hymns in worship. After some months, Jasmine was baptized, with Sheri and her parents as sponsors. The congregation delighted in walking with Jasmine in her journey of faith.

When she was a senior in high school, Jasmine dreamed of attending a Lutheran college. Jasmine's father, however, said she would receive no financial support from him if she went to a church college. If she persisted in her life with the church, she would have to live on her own. Jasmine struggled with her choice.

In our reading today, Jesus states that those who follow him may find themselves in a situation of choosing sides between faithfulness to their call to God and loyalty to their families. Jesus was wise to warn us that following the way of God's word can exact a cost from family relationships. Although it is sad, and at times wrenching, such divisions happen. The peace of Christ is not the same as preserving the status quo.

**Loving God, preserve my loved ones
and me in the unity of faith in your Son. Amen**

Prayer concern: Those estranged from their families

A happy celebration

**Hear, O daughter, consider and incline your ear;
forget your people and your father's house. (v. 10)**

The tone of the wedding song in these verses is a little different from the advice the pastor gave us when we were married years ago. The pastor said that our wedding was not to be a big production, with the bride as the star of the show. Rather, it was to be a service in which two people of equal importance joined their hearts and lives to form a new family before God.

Yesterday's reading sounded a somber note as Jesus warned that faithfulness in lives of discipleship might cause family division. Today's reading speaks of leaving home in a positive light—the bridegroom is waiting with love and unimaginable riches.

Consider, along with some of the writers of the New Testament, that Jesus is like the bridegroom, and the church is Christ's bride. Surely we can trust that any loss of family relationships we suffer in our lives as Jesus' disciples—whether agonizing emotional estrangement or simply physical distance—will be compensated beyond our highest expectations in the glory and riches of Christ.

**O God, lead me to the riches of an eternal
relationship with your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen**

Prayer concern: Newlyweds

Why spurn freedom?

So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God. (v. 7)

Three-year-old Anatoly sat in the judge's chambers with Mona and Jake. The judge asked Anatoly, "Who are these people?" Anatoly beamed as he said, "Mommy and Daddy!" The adoption was finalized.

After Paul brought the message of God's free gift of forgiveness through Christ to the churches in Galatia, some of the teachers who followed Paul distorted the truth by insisting that the Galatians must still adhere to the law of Moses, including the requirement of circumcision. In this letter, Paul urgently re-teaches the Galatians that they are not slaves who must work for eternal life. Rather, they are heirs—the rightful recipients of salvation, redeemed by Christ for adoption as children of God. Paul minced no words in presenting the gospel of grace.

There are still those who come around teaching that we must earn the right to be part of God's family by our own efforts. Whenever that faulty teaching surfaces, my fellow heirs, the book of Galatians is a good place to go to remind us of who has adopted us and set us free.

**Abba! Father! Thank you for
making me your child and heir. Amen**

Prayer concern: Families in dispute over inheritances

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

My soul magnifies the Lord. (v. 47)

When you look through a magnifying glass, you get a new perspective. Mary's perspective changed after the angel Gabriel told her the Holy Spirit would come upon her—that the power of the Most High would overshadow her and she would conceive a child.

In the midst of her questions and apprehensions, Mary sang. "My soul magnifies the Lord," she exclaimed. "The Lord is bigger than my world, bigger than my station in life, bigger than my doubts," she proclaimed. Mary had a new perspective—not because she was pregnant and a virgin and without a husband, but because God had remembered her. God had chosen her to be part of God's story of salvation.

This God remembered Abraham and Sarah, the people of Israel, and Mary. This God keeps promises made and remembers us also—in our homes, at work and play, and even in our graves. No matter who or where we are, this God calls us into the story of salvation. Like Mary, we carry Christ to the world around us, a world that looks different because of the God we praise and magnify.

Saving God, thank you for remembering me.

Help me to proclaim your love. Amen

Prayer concern: Those who are held in
low esteem by society

Who holds the mortgage?

Owe no one anything, except to love one another. (v. 8)

When I was a first-time homeowner, I needed to repair a leaky faucet. I turned the water off at the main valve inside the house, replaced the faucet, and turned the water back on. But then the main valve started to leak and wouldn't stop. What was I supposed to do? My first thought was to call the bank; they owned the house. Of course, the loan officer informed me that while the bank would take the house if I didn't make payments, they were not the "owners" and not responsible for leaky faucets.

When Jesus paid our debt to God, he did not remove our responsibility as "owners"—being good stewards of what God has given us. One of God's gifts is the gift of neighbors. Jesus' story of the good Samaritan defines a neighbor as one in need. This may be a family member, coworker, next-door neighbor, or stranger.

How are we stewards of this gift of neighbors? Paul points out that we owe our neighbors love. Not gushy, sentimental love, but sacrificial and serving love. This love lives out the power of the cross—flowing from a heart filled with the freedom of forgiveness and the praise of God.

Thank you, God, for your boundless love. May it so work in me that I love those around me. Amen

Prayer concern: Those who are homeless

One-to-one witness

**Greet Priscilla and Aquila, who work with
me in Christ Jesus. (v. 3)**

Romans 16:1-16 reads a bit like a genealogy passage from Genesis: "So-and-so begat so-and-so, who lived *x* number of years; and he begat so-and-so." Yet these verses describe an important characteristic of the Christian community. While it's true that the faith community offers a public witness in its worship, each individual's witness also proclaims Jesus to the world. My witness, and yours, welcomes others into our community of love.

Throughout Paul's letters, there are accounts of the people who were touched by his words and witness as he traveled among the young churches. Paul also relates how he was touched by the ministry of others.

Take a moment to recall the conversations in your own life—at home, at work, or at play—when you have shared the presence of Jesus with another person. Reflect on when the presence of Christ has been made known to you through someone's words to you. In our greetings and in our deeds of care, we offer Jesus' love to one another. Through this one-to-one witness, the church is nourished for healthy growth.

**Gracious God, lead me to share the
love of Christ with those I greet today. Amen**

Prayer concern: Other members of your church

God is good

I want you to be wise in what is good. (v. 19)

At our synod gatherings, we repeat this familiar call and response: "God is good, all the time. All the time, God is good."

In Genesis 1, God looked at creation and declared that it was very good. God intends for life to be good. The goodness of life flows from God and pervades all creation. It's in us, but sometimes it feels like it's locked away. "We are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves," we say in our liturgy. This goodness is in us, but it cannot always find its way out: "I do not do the good that I want" (Romans 7:19).

But Jesus Christ sets us free and releases the goodness within us. When we receive the body and blood of Christ in Holy Communion, we "taste and see that the LORD is good" (Psalm 34:8). It is the light of Christ in us that enables us to shine, so that others may see our good works and give glory to God.

Our trust in Jesus leads us to trust in God's goodness, no matter what troubles or challenges life hands us. Our trust in Jesus frees us to proclaim, "God is good, all the time. All the time, God is good."

God of peace and goodness,
fill me with the grace of Christ. Amen

Prayer concern: Worship leaders

The forgiveness of sins

**Bless the LORD, O my soul ... who forgives
all your iniquity. (vv. 2-3)**

Recent studies have indicated that there are health benefits to regular worship. People who worship and pray regularly tend to be physically healthier than those who do not. Youth and children whose parents worship with them regularly, pray with them, and encourage them to be active in their congregations are more likely to handle life's challenges in appropriate and healthy ways. Who can argue with the value of these benefits? Martin Luther states in the Small Catechism that "where there is forgiveness of sins there is life and salvation."

It seems to me that the power of a diligent worship and prayer life is centered in God's forgiveness of our sins. Forgiveness brings healing to our relationship with God, and is a tool for rebuilding the broken relationships in our lives. This forgiveness grants us peace with God, and grants the power to be at peace with one another. This forgiveness extends beyond the grave, promising us a place at God's heavenly table. This forgiveness is a gift of great value for healthy lives.

**God of mercy, forgive my sins and give me strength
to bring mercy and healing to our troubled world. Amen**

Prayer concern: Young people whose parents
do not worship with them

Remember the Sabbath

**Call the sabbath a delight and the
holy day of the LORD honorable. (v. 13)**

A sabbath is a day of rest. Isaiah calls it the “holy day of the LORD.” The sabbath invites us to step back from our daily labors and reconnect to God. A time of sabbath provides the strength needed by body, soul, and mind. As a restless night does not prepare us for the next day, so our hearts are restless until they rest in God, as St. Augustine tells us.

Sunday is often called the “sabbath day,” but what if we thought of each day as a “holy day of the LORD”? Our Sunday liturgy might then be seen as our work and our daily labors as our worship. We might come to liturgy ready to participate actively. We might give our best to our activities during the week, in praise of God. We might see honesty, integrity, and compassion as acts of worship.

With this change of perspective, we might make time each day for sabbath rest, finding new delight in prayer, fasting, almsgiving, liturgy, and rest—tools that God gives us for staying connected. We might strive to live each day as a holy day of the Lord.

**Dear God, fill me with your Spirit, that I
might find my rest and my work in you. Amen**

Prayer concern: Those who are weary in their work

God of life

You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom. (v. 18)

We confess that there is one God, but there are two gods preached in our world today. One is a god of violence, judgment, and wrath. This fearsome and angry god gives rise to greed, prejudice, and hatred.

The other is the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Rachel. This is the God of promise, hope, forgiveness, and mercy. This is the God we can trust, who gives rise to deeds of justice, acts of kindness, and works of love. This is the God of Jesus Christ, who raises the dead to new life.

This fundamental distinction leads to different behaviors and attitudes in our daily lives, and in our worship. When we live in fear, we worship out of duty. When we live in trust, we worship out of joy and thanksgiving. For we find in God life and salvation. This is the God we know in Jesus, and so we sing:

*Abel's blood for vengeance
Pleaded to the skies;
But the blood of Jesus
For our pardon cries.*

(“Glory Be to Jesus,” LBW 95)

God of love, thank you for my new life in Christ. Amen
Prayer concern: Those who are filled with hatred

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Immediately she stood up straight and began praising God. (v. 13)

The reading for August 15 described how God “lifted up the lowly” (Luke 1:52b). Mary’s lowliness was her humble station in life. Here, the lowliness is a physical one, a woman bent over for 18 years. With a word from Jesus, she is healed.

There are many things that can cause us to be “bent over.” Homework can cause us to be bent over books and notes. The physical burdens we might carry, such as lumber on a construction job, can cause us to be bent over. The emotional burdens we carry in our hearts can cause us to be bent over. The spiritual burdens that we carry in our souls can cause us to be bent over.

The story from Luke states simply and boldly that “Jesus is the cure for what ails you.” We find that hard to believe. Instead, we often think that psychotherapy, or the right diet, or the right pill is a cure in itself. The biblical truth is that Jesus alone brings health and wholeness to life.

**God of heaven and earth, bend down and
hear my cry. Help me to stand and give me the
light burden of the yoke of Jesus. Amen**

Prayer concern: Those who are ill

God has a plan

The LORD will make you a house. (v. 11)

David's heart is in the right place. He wants to build a house for God. After all, David lives in a fine house, but God has only a grotto. It seems like a good idea to Nathan, too. God, however, comes up with a better plan. God says, "Let me make a house for you." The "house" God will make for David is a line of descendants that will be "established forever."

We make plans and dream, but this text declares that God's plans for us are bigger than we can imagine. Paul also comes to that conclusion in Romans 11:33: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable are his ways!"

Our challenge is to trust that God has a plan for us, and to discern God's plan amid our human dreams and schemes. In prayer, in the study of Scripture, in community, in conversation, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, we can hear and discern God's call.

God's plan in Jesus is that love conquers evil, forgiveness conquers hate, and life conquers death. Moreover, in Jesus we have a place in the household that has been established forever.

God, thank you for your care and guidance.

Help me trust the future you have in store for me. Amen

Prayer concern: Construction workers

Bartholomew

Can anything good come out of Nazareth? (v. 46)

Little is known about Bartholomew. So little is known, in fact, that he is sometimes thought to be the disciple called Nathanael in John's Gospel. Bartholomew is named as an apostle in Matthew 10:3, and he seems to be about as significant as Nazareth. Yet both Bartholomew and Nazareth played a role in salvation history. Nazareth appears to be the town where Jesus grew up. Bartholomew followed Jesus and spread the good news of repentance and forgiveness in Christ's name.

Can any of us ever claim insignificance or lack of importance as excuses not to follow Jesus? I don't think so. In our workplaces, we can be honest laborers. In our classrooms, we can use our gifts with diligence. In our homes, we can love and serve the other members of our families. In our nursing homes, we can show kindness and offer prayer and supplication for all. God created the earth, and therefore what comes from the earth is good. Can anything good come out of Nazareth, or Bartholomew, or you, or me? Only the goodness of God!

O God, you have shown great kindness and honored me with the call to follow Christ; use my humble efforts to help others know your goodness. Amen

Prayer concern: Those who feel insignificant

A beautiful gate

People would lay him daily at the gate of the temple called the Beautiful Gate. (v. 2)

Each day is a beautiful gate into God's world. Every morning is a beautiful gate into a day of God's presence. What wonder and amazement await us. What leaping and praising are in store for us. God was up long before us, preparing and planning our day.

Could we start each day in this frame of mind? I often rise thinking of the day's meetings, the day's work, and the day's anxiety. What if we rose—at our Savior's calling—to a new creation? To quote from 2 Corinthians 5:17, what if we sought the truth that "See, everything has become new"?

In the Small Catechism, Martin Luther explains that this is the truth of our new life in Christ. Luther says of Holy Baptism's connection to daily life that "day after day a new self should arise to live with God in righteousness and purity forever."

God puts us in a new creation each day. The covers we throw off each morning are the beautiful gate into a world where God is working and playing, singing and dancing, praising and leaping—and inviting us into the wonder and joy of it all.

**God of the universe, help me to
rejoice in the wonder of creation. Amen**

Prayer concern: Artists

Let your light so shine

Their hearts are firm, secure in the LORD. (v. 7)

The psalmist describes a person of honesty, integrity, and compassion. The source of strength for this person is God. When we begin by trusting God, everything else flows freely and fully. No, not always smoothly; but empowered by the mercy of God, our lives are secure.

The person in this psalm lives a life of mercy. When our hearts are right with God, we are one with God and live as people of compassion and generosity. We find that giving ourselves away is the richest blessing we can experience.

The person in this psalm is a shining witness to all. The light of Christ shining through us invites others to find security in God's judgment and mercy. Some will see our good works and gnash their teeth. Some will see our good works and give glory to God in heaven.

In Mark 15:34, Jesus cries out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This pressing question is also the first line of Psalm 22. Our foundation is trust in God, even in the most painful moments of life. With such a God, our hearts are firm and our lives secure.

**God of light, be near me in times of trouble and
fix my heart on your promises in Jesus Christ. Amen**
Prayer concern: Those who live with chronic pain

I pick you!

It is better to be told, “Come up here.” (v. 7)

When you are waiting to be noticed, it is a joy to hear your name. Being chosen is an honor, whether it is for a sandlot game, a committee, or ordination to the ministry of Word and Sacrament.

Being noticed means we have some value, some importance to the one who has chosen us. This is the truth of the kingdom of God: our Father in heaven, who notices when a sparrow falls from the sky, has noticed and chosen us.

In Holy Baptism we have been invited to “come up here,” to join the long chain of witnesses to Jesus Christ. We have been invited to sit at table in God’s eternal kingdom. We have been chosen to be disciples.

We have been chosen to carry the cross, give ourselves away, and rejoice in the goodness of God. We have been empowered to love and worship God with all our heart, mind, soul, and body. We have been given life that has no end.

We have been chosen out of “divine goodness and mercy,” as Martin Luther says in the Small Catechism. We are not chosen because we are good but because God is good.

**Almighty God, thank you for hearing my prayers
and filling my heart with your love. Amen**

Prayer concern: Seminary students

The peace connection

Be content with what you have. (v. 5)

Contentment is a rare thing. Popular culture suggests that there is always something more to have or to do. As a result, finding contentment can be a struggle.

From time to time, there is a contest for artists or photographers to depict "peace." One winning piece depicted a bird in its nest, resting on a branch that hung over a waterfall. The bird appeared at peace, yet there was a clear threat that one gust of wind could blow it all into the falls.

Contentment is not found in possessions or the absence of possessions. It is not found in work, rest, or play. It is a gift of God. And yet, it is more than a gift. It is a way of living when one stays connected to God. God offers many ways to keep us connected. We read about some of these ways in today's passage from Hebrews. When we are connected to God, we find contentment in mutual love, in hospitality to strangers, in honoring our families, in remembering those who suffer, and in offering our praise.

Contentment is the sure confidence that we belong to God, who will help us and defend us—at work and at rest, in living and in dying, now and forever.

**God of peace, be present with me now and always.
Grant peace to all your people in Jesus Christ. Amen**

Prayer concern: Those living in war zones

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. (v. 13)

Many of Jesus' parables challenge our human comfort zones. His stories urge careful reflection on the desires and motivations that direct our actions. Hard as it is to learn to take the "lowest place" and wait for a host who might invite one higher, Jesus' words to the Pharisee, in whose home he was a guest, seem utterly impossible. By telling his host that the party guests should not be friends and relatives—or those who will offer an invitation in return—Jesus threatens cultural norms. He says "no" to the commonly held principle of "I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine."

Indeed, when Jesus suggests that the ones to invite to parties are those who cannot reciprocate the kindness, he advances the cause of all who rely on another's grace. Jesus speaks of earthly relationships and how we should treat one another. He lifts up the cause of the needy. Jesus' words also remind us that the host of heaven extends a welcome to God's great banquet to each one of us, despite our inability to earn our acceptance at this feast of life.

Gracious God, thank you for welcoming me to your table.

Help me invite others to know your grace. Amen

Prayer concern: Those who are lonely

Going it alone

Why did you cross over to fight against the Ammonites, and did not call us to go with you? (v. 1)

Delivering accounts of battles lasting generations, the book of Judges deals with the settlement of Israel in Canaan—and the traditions of the tribes and those who came to be Israel's judges. Confusing stories about loyalties abound in this book, but these stories have value. Indeed, when Jephthah is confronted by the Ephraimites, a time-honored question echoes, "Why didn't you let us help you?" While we could surmise many reasons for their asking, a basic question underlies it all: What motivates people to "go it alone" instead of asking for help?

Like Jephthah, many people in the church fall into patterns of doing things on our own. Perhaps that's because we can't see another way, or because we've been let down before when we've asked for help. Sometimes it's just easier to do things ourselves. Maybe we even want the credit for our labor. Today, let us think about what it does to others when we take care of things all on our own. Where might we make room for another to help in the work of our day?

**Leading God, open me to help others
in the course of my work this day. Amen**

Prayer concern: Children who are orphaned
because of HIV/AIDS

A beginning of deliverance

It is he who shall begin to deliver Israel. (v. 5)

The resurgent cycling between the Israelites' faithlessness and loyalty to God has led again to Israel's captivity, this time for 40 years at the hands of the Philistines. Still, such punishment is not our text's focus. Rather we are invited to the next step: imagining God's deliverance from that captivity. As certain as the cycle of failings has been, so also is the work of God to redeem the lost. Thus, an angel appears with the good news of a child to be born. Instructions about his upbringing are linked to his life's special purpose: to begin to deliver Israel.

The child announced is Samson, who becomes a judge of Israel. Wondrous as his birth was, Samson's life is filled with its own cycles of faithlessness and loyalty to God. Nevertheless, God uses Samson for great purposes. Samson has a part in the ongoing deliverance of God's people. Remembering how God worked through Samson despite his imperfections, let us open ourselves to the ways God would use us in the ongoing story of salvation.

**Lord Jesus, help me to be a witness to
your saving power in all I do and say. Amen**

Prayer concern: Those who fear that
their work has no value

Trust in God's blessings

If the LORD had meant to kill us, he would not have accepted a burnt offering and a grain offering at our hands. (v. 23)

Delighting that a son will be born to them, Manoah and his wife plan a feast for the visitor—whose name is “too wonderful”—who delivered the wonderful news. Their guest suggests that the food be offered to God. Later, as the flame from the altar rises, the visitor ascends within it and they fall on their faces. Manoah wonders if they have seen the Lord and thus will die.

It seems a strange response to us, but Manoah and his wife are God-fearing people who believed one could not look upon God and live. While many Israelites around them are losing faith, Manoah continues to fear the Lord and worries what will happen because of what they have seen. How wonderful it is then to hear his wife's solid reasoning born of deep trust in God's ways! She quickly adds up the happenings and declares that God doesn't mean them harm and is still blessing them. It's something of a knee-jerk reaction for all of us—to let fear override the signs that build up hope. We can be thankful that Manoah had his wife's witness to God's faithfulness and love.

When I am afraid, O God, send witnesses to renew my trust in your constant love. Amen

Prayer concern: Family members

Rebellion or refuge

Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain? (v. 1)

For all who will listen, Handel's magnificent oratorio, *Messiah*, unfolds a wealth of Scripture pointing to Jesus Christ as God's Anointed One. Immediately preceding the famed "Hallelujah Chorus," four works sing the psalmist's complaint about humanity's rebellion against God. The cry goes out, "Let us burst their bonds asunder and cast their cords from us" (v. 3). But God's plan will not be undone. As the well-known words later sing out, "The kingdom of this world is become the Kingdom of our God and of his Christ. And he shall reign for ever and ever."

Much in this world can be seen as evidence of rebellion against God's ways. We often fail to take refuge in the Lord; instead, we put trust in ourselves, our institutions, and our earthly leaders. We do not remember that the Christ who reigns is the very one who bears humanity as a child born for us and suffers even death on our behalf. As we read the psalmist's words today, may we not be engulfed in worries about those who rebel against God. Rather, let us who take refuge in God, know ourselves blessed, happy.

**When all around me seems to deny your reign,
help me trust you, Lord Jesus. Amen**

Prayer concern: Those who work for peace

Choosing life

Choose life so that you and your descendants may live. (v. 19)

As part of Moses' concluding charge, this call to choose good over evil is a powerful summary of his hopes for the Israelites as they entered the promised land. Later, the words were layered with new meaning as future generations contemplated a return after exile.

Today, this challenge echoes forcefully in a world often bent on choosing according to immediate pleasures and satisfactions, with little thought given to a bigger picture of life and well-being. People often see God's laws as things that get in the way of personal pleasure, comfort, or enjoyment. Rarely are these rules seen as guidelines for the best of life.

When Martin Luther wrote the Small Catechism, he revolutionized the way people thought about the Ten Commandments. Luther's explanations of the Commandments do not simply tell us what we should not do, they also lift up the positive ways these Commandments can direct our actions. This approach broadens our understanding of how our actions (and inactions) affect the world around us.

Wise God, help me to follow your way. Amen

Prayer concern: Lawmakers we elect

Freed for partnership

Welcome him as you would welcome me. (v. 17)

From house arrest in Rome, Paul writes a plea on behalf of a runaway slave. Roman law at the time would have allowed Philemon to kill his slave upon recapture, but Paul urges that the slave, Onesimus, be welcomed back. Not only does Paul desire that Onesimus be spared a death sentence, but Paul hopes he will be received "no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother" (v. 16). Paul goes even further, challenging Philemon to offer the slave a welcome like the one Philemon would extend to Paul.

I read this passage longing for a clear line of reasoning to counter the practice of slavery. I find myself hoping at every turn of phrase that Paul will use his considerable skills to speak in opposition to that horrific human bondage—yet he does not. Further, Paul's apparent acceptance of the practice was often misused for generations to justify slavery elsewhere.

Still, Paul's letter does propose a fundamental shift in how we understand our indebtedness to one another and, ultimately, to God. In this letter, Paul reframes the idea of who we are in the new freedom to which Christ has set us free.

Jesus, you have freed us from the slavery of sin and self-justification; help us to serve one another freely. Amen

Prayer concern: Prisoners

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost

None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions. (v. 33)

What do you make of today's key verse? Many of us bristle—recognizing the penetrating force of Jesus' words—yet somehow we go on with breakfast and go off to worship as though nothing difficult has been said. Do we think these words are time-bound to ancient Palestine and don't address modern-day disciples? Or do we spiritualize the statement and dull the sharp edge that we fear?

Jesus speaks powerfully in this passage about loyalties. Everyone is included. Through these words, Jesus presses would-be followers to know that first place in each heart belongs only to him.

This isn't much of a recruitment strategy. These words must have scared off great numbers of potential followers. Indeed, they give us pause as well. For Jesus seems to say that each one of us must count the cost of being connected to him. If we follow Jesus, our hold on what is valued in worldly terms will be loosened—all the way to the point of letting go. For most of us, this will not come all at once. Still, we do well to realize what is at stake in following Christ, who was faithful even to death.

Jesus, help me put you first. Amen

Prayer concern: Parents of first-year college students

On their own

All the people did what was right in their own eyes. (v. 6)

Stolen silver. A curse exchanged for a blessing. Idols and priest in a family shrine. This scene from the Ephraim hill country boggles the mind and troubles the soul. It reads like a soap opera. Scarcely can we imagine each plot turn as Micah returns his mother's stolen silver, and she prays God's blessing on the thief then gives him a costly idol for his shrine.

Although Micah likely began setting up this shrine for worship of the Lord, it becomes a place for increasingly elaborate worship, as Micah makes an *ephod* (a vestment worn by priests), installs a Levite priest, and creates *teraphim* (household idols). What he establishes is against the teachings and commandments of God, but the lack of instruction in another way leaves Micah and the others on their own.

This sad story of religious chaos invites us to give thanks for those who help us to reflect carefully on God's teachings and our own practices of worship. The rampant confusion in Ephraim reminds us what can come of people left solely to their own devices. Even good intentions can go awry.

Thank you, God, for those who study your word and seek your guiding hand in leadership of the church. Amen

Prayer concern: Seminary professors

How do we know?

Inquire of God that we may know whether the mission we are undertaking will succeed. (v. 5)

It is reasonable to want to know if one's plans will be successful. We come across people looking for such assurances all the time: Will my investment in this stock pay off? Will this job allow me to fulfill my sense of calling? Should I start a family with this person? What often underlies such inquiry is a sense that someone else knows the answers.

In the days when the Danites sought a territory for their tribe, spies were sent to the country of Ephraim, where Micah had set up his shrine. Encountering the young Levite priest, they readily ascribed to him the authority of one who speaks for God. Effectively, they urged him to speak a blessing on their plans. They wanted reassurance that their mission would succeed.

Might this story help us in our own decision-making? Perhaps it lays bare the folly of turning to supposed authorities, with whom there is no relationship, for answers better searched out by ourselves. Wanting to know the success of our plans is not wrong, but we must be careful as we choose to whom we turn for help in discerning our way.

Lead me, O God, and direct my plans this day. Amen

Prayer concern: Those struggling to make decisions

Times of trial

Is it better for you to be priest to the house of one person, or to be priest to a tribe and clan in Israel? (v. 19)

With assurance from the young Levite priest that their mission was under the eye of the Lord, the Danites set out to conquer Laish. On their way, the reconnaissance party of five again visits the shrine of Micah in Ephraim. While looting the shrine, the Levite priest challenges their purpose. Urging him to keep quiet, they offer him a deal—to go along with them.

The greater prestige (and potentially the greater compensation) of being priest to a tribe instead of a household lures the Levite away from Micah's shrine. True to his earlier statement (Judges 17:9), this Levite would live wherever he found a place. Service to God does not seem to have been a factor to him. Thus, he joins the Danites, taking along the ephod, teraphim, and silver idol.

Another account of a terrible time in the history of Israel, this passage demonstrates the disastrous ways of following one's own desires rather than God's. The Danites steal from Micah; the Levite abandons his post; a quiet city is burned—because of what people want and their opportunity to take it.

God of my journey, help me stand firm when

temptations to turn from you come my way. Amen

Prayer concern: Those who suffer violence at home

The wisdom of God's mercy

You desire truth in the inward being;
therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. (v. 6)

Whenever I read Psalm 51, I recall the pleading tone of Ash Wednesday liturgies. Invariably, this psalm brings me to my knees with the deep awareness that I have failed to love God with my whole heart and that I rarely love my neighbor as myself. Truly, for most of us it requires no strain to summon thoughts of what we have done amiss and what good we have neglected to do. Yet I wonder if we might move with this psalmist beyond pleading for God's mercy and open ourselves to God's regeneration.

Alongside the imagery of blotting out sin, Psalm 51 presses us to plead not only for forgiveness. It urges that we would seek to gain wisdom in our souls, knowing not only our sin but also God's steadfast love. Beginning our worship or daily prayer with confession sometimes leads us to focus exclusively on the idea that we need to be cleaned up, as if sin were some sludge to be washed off. What joy there is to focus as well on the One who desires truth in our inward being: the knowledge of ourselves as simultaneously sinner and saint!

**Thank you, God, for putting a new spirit
within me. Help me always to remember your love. Amen**

Prayer concern: Those overwhelmed by guilt

Answered prayer

**And the LORD changed his mind about the disaster
that he planned to bring on his people. (v. 14)**

The picture in this text of Moses pleading with God is strangely wonderful. While showing a somewhat frightening image of God's anger and disappointment, it also reinforces the importance of pleading one's case before God, naming the desires of one's heart, and asking God's blessing. Our passage is preceded by the story of the Israelites fashioning a golden calf. When Aaron proclaims a festival day, the revelry offends God. Wanting some distance from "those people," God tells Moses, "Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them" (v. 10a). It sounds like God has had enough.

But Moses is no longer a frightened spokesperson unsure of his abilities. God had gifted Moses with presence and power enough to stand up to Pharaoh, to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, and to teach the ways of God. Now, Moses' greatest challenge comes as he boldly insists that God be faithful to God's promises of old. Moses speaks of the relationship God has to the people and how God has sworn to love and bless them forever. Moses calls on God to be true to God's steadfast loving self. And God is.

Thank you, God, for your patience beyond measure. Amen

Prayer concern: Those who intercede for others

An unlikely example

The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost. (v. 15)

Today's passage lays out truths concerning Paul's former ways as a persecutor of the church. It names that he was "a blasphemer, a persecutor, and a man of violence" (v. 13). It is unusual to hear such a list as evidence endorsing a person's claim to be an exemplar. Still, this one called "foremost of sinners" knows God's mercy through Jesus Christ.

One can hardly read this text and not swell with hope. Wherever we think we fall on some imagined continuum of sinfulness, let us be encouraged by this testimony to God's patience and love. Indeed, let us follow Paul's footsteps to become examples of the mercy that God works in our lives.

What might change in the world if, in our Christian witness, we spoke plainly of our faults and failings instead of scurrying about to cover them up? What would those around us learn if we committed ourselves to the boldness of claiming our imperfect selves as vessels for God's use? How do we balance God's call to wholeness with the truth of our own brokenness?

Patient God, you know me and love me.

Help me serve you just as I am. Amen

Prayer concern: Those seeking God's mercy

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. (v. 10)

At the start of a new academic year, stories of moving hassles are plentiful on campus. Getting one's stuff from there to here takes more than just willing hands, boxes, and moving trucks—it requires patience and good humor. When something valued gets lost in the frenzy, people also need perseverance. Perseverance is keeping one's focus when things seem hopeless. It's especially important when seeking lost things.

Jesus persevered with individuals that many people thought of as hopeless. Jesus regularly gathered with them to share meals and speak of God's love. On one occasion, when Pharisees and scribes complained about Jesus' behavior, Jesus told stories of lost things painstakingly sought after. Jesus believed the best of these leaders—that they would be like shepherds and search for their missing sheep. Telling of a woman who lost a day's wages and turned her home upside down to find the wages, Jesus underscored the delight of her invitation, "Rejoice with me."

Time and again, God shows us that we are worthy of God's seeking because we are God's beloved ones.

**Thank you, God, for seeking out
those who are lost and feel hopeless. Amen**

Prayer concern: Campus ministers

In the face of deep despair

**Is not your fear of God your confidence,
and the integrity of your ways your hope? (v. 6)**

In response to the long, painful speech made when Job curses the day he was born, Job's friend Eliphaz takes him to task for his despair. Naming how important Job has been in helping others to keep faith, Eliphaz accuses Job of impatience and dismay. Eliphaz doesn't acknowledge what has brought Job to despondency. Although he may have meant well, Eliphaz's sharp words deepen Job's despair. No wonder some ask, "With a friend like Eliphaz, who needs enemies?"

Can you relate to Job's situation? In your times of trial, have the words of others helped you recall that you are loved by God, or have they somehow deepened your despair? It's normal to question the causes of suffering. Sometimes well-meaning people suggest that our troubles result from a test from God that we're failing—that the integrity of our ways is somehow lacking. In these times, remember that God's promise is not to spare us from danger but to be with us in the midst of it. Being afraid of God or relying on the integrity of our ways is never our hope; instead, we trust only in the mercy of God.

**Almighty God, help me to share
hope with those who despair. Amen**

Prayer concern: Those who are suffering

Motivation

Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (v. 17)

Motivation is an important consideration in understanding the actions of another person. At times, why someone does something is as important as what he or she does. I can give a gift to a friend because I care for her, or because I want to influence her to do something for me. My response to a friend who gives me a gift is also motivated by our relationship. When I truly love this friend, I respond with gratitude to the gift.

Most of us know John 3:16 and have focused on the words “everyone who believes” as we tried to understand our relationship with God. Have we also heard the motivation focused in God’s love, spoken of at the beginning of the verse? This same motivation is reinforced in verse 17. God sent Jesus to save us, even though we deserve condemnation.

Our response to God’s undeserved kindness reflects our motivation. Do we respond out of guilt and fear, or out of love and gratitude?

Gracious God, your love motivated you to send your Son to save us. Motivate me to respond in love by helping others. Amen

Prayer concern: Those working to harvest crops

What's on your mind?

What are human beings, that you make so much of them, that you set your mind on them, visit them every morning, test them every moment? (vv. 17-18)

Getting along with others can test our patience. And it can test our faith. It's not unusual for people who spend a good deal of time together to experience frustration with each other from time to time. Even our congregations are not free from this tension. We may find that our priorities don't always match, or that our individual approaches to addressing certain situations lead to painful differences.

Job saw God at work in creation in one way. Job's friends saw God's way of working differently. And then Job was plagued with agonizing questions. While he recognized that God didn't forget God's creation, Job felt tortured and burdened.

When life doesn't work the way we think it should, what fills our minds? Do we think about God in negative terms, or do we look for God at work in the circumstances of the moment?

O God, when life seems filled with conflict and difficulties, help me see you at work in me. Amen

Prayer concern: Those seeking work to support their families

Servants praise

**From the rising of the sun to its setting the name
of the LORD is to be praised. (v. 3)**

Pearl had married early in life, but her husband died when she was in her mid-20s. She never remarried in the 72 years that followed. She never had children, and she acquired little wealth. Yet Pearl had found something of great value in her life. She was able to praise God from morning until night as God's faithful servant.

Pearl worked in a neighborhood flower shop. Whenever the neighborhood children would come in and ask what flower they could buy for their mothers or grandmothers, Pearl asked how much they had to spend. No matter how small the amount, there was always a lovely bloom or small bouquet for the child to give to a loved one. Pearl made up the difference as necessary from her own pocket.

Being able to help others express their love is a gift of great service. It stems from an attitude that one can praise the Lord every moment of every day. What gifts for service has God given you?

**God of love, you are worthy of praise!
May my life reflect my love for you. Amen**
Prayer concern: Children and youth in
your neighborhood

Life-giving relationships

Surely I will never forget any of their deeds. (v. 7)

Research tells us that the pace of our culture has accelerated so much that the average amount of time a father spends in focused conversation with his son or daughter is only a few minutes a week. Yet the average adult spends more than two hours a day watching TV.

Face-to-face conversations with children and grandchildren—and spouses and friends—are often interrupted by the distractions around us. Even when we do converse with others, we may find ourselves thinking about the next thing we want to say or something else we want to do.

These distractions can be crushing to those seeking our attention. Ultimately, we diminish the very quality of life that God intends us to enjoy. Even when we speak about how highly we value relationships, our practices do not always reflect our words. This is regrettable; our interaction with others enhances our lives and the lives of others. Relationships break down, people go their separate ways, and we find ourselves alone. God invites us to nurture healthier and more life-giving relationships.

**Lord, help me be truly attentive to
others in my conversations today. Amen**

Prayer concern: Those whose family
relationships are strained

Everyone

[God] desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. (v. 4)

Intellectually, I know that God wants everyone to be saved and to know the depth of love and forgiveness offered in Jesus Christ. On a day-to-day level, however, I don't always look at each person as one who is sought by this loving God.

For example, what about the person who cuts me off in traffic? What about my neighbor who lets his dog dig in my front yard? What about all those people whose lack of motivation means I have to pay more in taxes? How about that person who takes extra items through the express lane at the store? And what of that couple that sits in my favorite pew at church? So what about these people? God loves each one of them and wants me to help them experience the love and grace of Christ.

If this is ever going to happen, there will have to be a lot of prayer. And God is going to have to send the Spirit each day to change my attitude from grumbling about these people to offering thanksgiving for them.

God of love, please be patient with me. Remind me to express my thankfulness for the people you have brought into my life and help me show them your love. Amen
Prayer concern: Those who do not know God's love

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

And if you have not been faithful with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own? (v. 12)

My niece just turned two. Even though her mother has worked diligently to teach her to share, she is more intent on mastering the powerful ownership word, *mine*. This is not unusual for two-year-olds. Yet I know many 42-year-olds, and even some 62-year-olds, who still think the “stuff” they have is their own.

While I was growing up, our congregation sang this offertory during worship: “We give thee but thine own.” I thought then that these words were speaking of the coins and bills in the offering plate. As an adult, I learn each day that there are many things God has given us—time, friendships, family, treasure, abilities, wisdom, and even attention.

I sometimes ask myself several questions: Am I faithful in giving all these things to God? Do I use my time to grow in faith? Is God invited into my friendships? Do I offer my abilities to help others experience God’s forgiveness? What gets my attention for most of the hours in my day? If all these gifts belong to God in the first place, what does it mean to use them faithfully and to offer them back to God?

Gracious God, help me be a faithful steward. Amen

Prayer concern: Home health-care workers

Help!

**With God are wisdom and strength;
he has counsel and understanding. (v. 13)**

My friend, Dr. Barbara Varenhorst, is a psychologist and counselor who has a great love for youth. In her ministry in a public school setting, she learned that youth are most likely to go to their friends when they need help. Understanding that reality, she developed a way to teach skills to young people so that they can make friends, listen intentionally, and ultimately help their friends make wise decisions. Her approach—called peer ministry—is inspired by the parable of the good Samaritan. We are called to come close to those in need and touch their lives. Christian servanthood is foundational to everything that these youthful peer ministers do.

Job was in a time of great need. His friends, however, failed to help him connect with God. Somehow, Job found the strength to turn his attention back to God. How much easier it would have been if he had had friends who helped him do this.

We can take a lesson from Dr. Varenhorst's peer ministers. Our offers to help can be based on our understanding of Christian service. We can gently and lovingly help people connect to God in times of need.

Lord, guide me to serve you by serving others. Amen

Prayer concern: Guidance counselors

Lines or arrows?

**For I have come to call not the righteous
but sinners. (v. 13)**

Who's welcome in your life? Are you surrounded only by people of faith? Or do you count among your friends those who are still asking questions about God? How do your Christian friends react to those who do not consider themselves believers?

Jesus was at home with anyone interested in his invitation to know God as a loving, caring Creator. When the Pharisees complained that he was spending time with sinners, Jesus reminded them that he came to invite these very sinners and all like them to experience God's grace. Even though Matthew was considered a sinner by the Pharisees, Jesus called Matthew to be one of his disciples.

While the Pharisees worried who was inside the lines that separated good from bad, Jesus was more interested in the direction a person was headed. When the Pharisees looked at Matthew, they saw lines; Jesus saw arrows pointing to Matthew's potential. We see arrows when we look at people's openness to grow and give faith a chance. We see arrows when we pray for others and offer encouragement and invitation.

**Lord, help me see the smallest signs of
faith in those who do not yet know you. Amen**

Prayer concern: Those who need a caring friend

Cycles of hope

You would call, and I would answer you. (v. 15)

We planted a redbud tree in our front yard when we moved into our house several years ago. The first spring, it was covered with beautiful, tiny, pink blossoms followed by shiny, heart-shaped leaves. The next spring, however, things were different. When the other redbuds in the neighborhood were blooming, then leafing out, our tree did nothing. Even after all the tulips had died back, the redbud was bare. Apparently, it had died over the winter. I sawed it down but left the stump in the ground to avoid disturbing the perennials around it.

In the middle of the summer, eight branches sprouted overnight from the base of that stump. They were covered with big heart-shaped leaves, reminiscent of the tree I planted two years before.

Job knew that the cycles of nature provide hope, even when all seems dead and gone. He looked for hope—not in nature, but in God, in whom he had faith. We, too, are encouraged to look to God for hope when we are overwhelmed by the circumstances of life.

**God, give me faith to see that my current troubles
are nothing when compared to your eternal hope. Amen**

Prayer concern: Gardeners and landscape workers

Leaders

Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD, O my soul! (v. 1)

Businesses and governments experience significant changes in leadership on a regular basis. In many cases, these offices continue to operate somewhat normally during these times of transition, as they have plans in place to help them move through transitions in leadership.

We experience leadership changes in our congregations, too. These changes may not occur as dramatically or as often as they do in other organizations, but they do happen. It's necessary for congregations to make plans for the future. These plans give us goals that inspire our efforts and offer a sense of accomplishment when they are achieved. Sometimes these plans may change when leadership changes. Sometimes members of the congregation take ownership of these plans and see them to completion. Our plans can help us through a transition in leadership.

The psalmist knows that no matter what we face today or in the future, God will lead. We can count on God's plan for creation. God is a leader who will not leave us. Praise the Lord!

**Thank you, God, for leading your people to grace
and purpose. Inspire our plans and inhabit our actions,
so that others may experience your love. Amen**

Prayer concern: Those who fear the future

It won't last forever

Alas for those who are at ease. (v. 1)

New homes built in the United States today are often three or four times larger than homes built 50 years ago. Those living in these large homes have walk-in closets with far more clothes than they could wear in a month, and their wardrobes change as quickly as the seasons. While the average family in the 1950s had only one car, today's affluent families have a car for each licensed driver. Many people eat out more than they eat at home.

Maybe too many of us have become too comfortable in our abundance. Are we captive to the things we have and want? What would we do if it all were suddenly taken away? Do we own our possessions or do they own us?

Amos issues a solemn warning to the affluent rulers of his day. His description of Jerusalem sounds eerily familiar. Amos calls us to take stock of our lives.

**God of abundance, help me see that your
blessings are meant to be shared. Let me find my
security in you, not in the things that I own. Amen**

Prayer concern: Those who do not have
enough food today

Lasting riches

Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. (v. 11)

Juan and Ingrid own a small farm in the Missiones province in northern Argentina. Their few acres are home to some pigs, a cow and calf, and a flock of chickens and ducks. They raise citrus fruits, vegetables, and tobacco. The tobacco companies pay a small daily wage for their work and provide the family with health insurance. Juan and Ingrid live in a simple home that has two rooms. The bedroom has a large mattress and a few blankets. Three dresses hang in Ingrid's closet. Juan has two pairs of pants and three shirts.

Juan and Ingrid know that others have more possessions than they do, but they are happy. They beam with pride at their three-year-old daughter, Griselda. She knows her colors and can count to 10. They cherish their faith in Jesus. Juan and Ingrid lead a simple life, uncluttered and unhurried. They have time for each other, and they make time to pray and read the Bible. It is easy for them to pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness. They are rich.

**God of all mercy, shape our desires
to want the riches you offer: righteousness, godliness,
faith, love, endurance, and gentleness. Amen**

Prayer concern: Mothers and fathers
of young children

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

**They have Moses and the prophets; they should
listen to them. (v. 29)**

Pastor Lavin was my pastor in high school. I admired his sense of certainty about his faith. He taught about living a life of faith in both words and actions. One of his often-shared sayings was, "What gets your attention, gets you." In Pastor Lavin's words, I heard Jesus' words: "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21).

Jesus told the parable of the rich man and Lazarus to remind his listeners that what captures their attention, captures their hearts, too. For the rich man, the pleasures of earthly life captured his attention, and kept him from hearing about the life of faith that Moses and the prophets taught. He learned the lesson only when it was too late. Wanting to warn his loved ones, the rich man asked for someone to go to them from the afterlife to warn them. The rich man was told that they already had someone trying to get their attention.

What gets our attention? Who gets our attention? Do we hear the words of eternal life or do we hear the temporary claims of a consumer culture?

**God of all tomorrows, help me pay attention
to the life of faith today. Amen**

Prayer concern: Hospice workers

The story that inspires faith

Oh, that I were as in the months of old, as in the days when God watched over me. (v. 2)

It's always a little humorous to hear a middle-school student talk about the "old days when I was little." I guess we all have ways of romanticizing the past. Do you ever long for the past, for simpler times and less worrisome days? In the midst of his suffering, Job looked back and recalled memories of strength and power, of times when God seemed close at hand. Those times probably seemed far away in Job's state of weakness and helplessness.

Last fall, Bob was admitted to the hospital when he had difficulty eating. As the doctors began running tests, Bob—an active lay minister in the church—told me that he was at peace. He was ready for whatever lay ahead. Bob trusted God. The doctors were looking for an infection, but instead they found cancer in multiple sites. At first, Bob's conversation was focused on the past. He spoke of all God had done. As time went on, he talked about the present and the future. The story of God's love in Bob's past gave him faith and strength to face the present and anticipate the future.

Dear God, thank you for the stories from my past that remind me of your love for me. Amen

Prayer concern: Those battling cancer

Forgiveness and salvation

**He has redeemed my soul from going down to the Pit,
and my life shall see the light. (33:28)**

There is release in admitting our sin. Carrying the guilt and fear brought on by our selfishness can leave us struggling to look up—to see out of a pit of despair. Jesus Christ lifts us out of the pit to new life and hope.

Sometimes when we suffer, our friends are like the friends that Job had. While they may be polite, they think that we have done something to deserve our suffering. Yet the story of Job teaches us that bad things can happen to good people. More importantly, it teaches us that God is faithful; God will redeem us.

Faithful followers of Jesus are not immune to the tragedies of earthly life. Faith is not *insurance* but rather *assurance*. We are assured that we do not face difficult circumstances alone, and that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ. Take courage in God's love if you face challenges today. Offer hope when those around you face challenges of their own.

**God of all who suffer, open my heart to
see your presence with me in all situations. Amen**

Prayer concern: Those who serve the church
in other countries

The power of our testimony

But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony. (v. 11)

"I think I can, I think I can." Do you recall the story of the Little Engine's determination to go over the mountain? God's people have heard a story that tells of such determination, too. This story, this word of our testimony, gives us the power to overcome whatever evil we face, whatever adversity crosses our path.

In our reading from Revelation, Michael and his angels fought the enemies of heaven and defeated them. After the battle, a voice from heaven clarified that Michael was able to conquer the "deceiver of the whole world" through the "blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony." This was not a victory born of Michael's determination. It was a victory of God's reign.

This is true in our daily lives, also. Our testimonies are not of our determination but rather of our faith in our powerful God and loving Savior. Our testimony tells how Jesus Christ overcame sin and death so that we, too, might be raised to new life in God's realm. In the life of faith, "I think I can, I think I can" is replaced with "We know he did."

Conquering Lord, inspire my faith so that I might speak and others might hear of your power. Amen

Prayer concern: Those who serve in the military

God blesses the faithful

**Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him;
do not fret over those who prosper in their way,
over those who carry out evil devices. (v. 7)**

Life doesn't always make sense. Some people work day and night but never seem to get ahead. Others make serious mistakes, yet they prosper. It doesn't seem fair. We long for an explanation.

A former Nebraska football coach was frequently criticized because he gave second, third, and even 37th chances to members of the team who did things without thinking about the consequences of their actions. The coach was a strong man of faith, a Christian who trusted that God would work more effectively through his gracious response than if he responded to these transgressions in more legalistic ways. Sometimes this coach's strategy worked, and a football player learned and grew. When this happened, the coach gave God the credit.

We, too, are faced with situations when we are called to trust God to work through our gracious responses. It's a challenge sometimes to not use our energies to fret over what others do or have. It takes strength to choose the way of grace. At times like this, know that God blesses the faithful, always. Be patient.

God of grace, help me to trust you and live in faith. Amen

Prayer concern: Athletes and entertainers

Morning

Almighty God, thank you for freeing us from the power of sin and bringing us to new life through baptism. This day and all days, free my hands for meaningful work that cares for the needs of others. Free my heart to reach out to each person I meet with love and compassion. Free my tongue to speak of your glory. In Jesus' name. Amen

Evening

At the close of this day, hear my prayer, gracious Lord. O Christ, my hope, fill my heart with a vision of your heavenly realm. O Christ, my freedom, forgive me for any harm that I have done this day by my actions or my failure to act. O Christ, my life, inspire me to more faithful discipleship and grant me another day to proclaim your salvation. O Christ, my peace, grant me a quiet night and peace at the last. Amen

A word from Martin Luther

Good works follow good teaching. They are the good fruits of a good tree.

—Martin Luther

Luther's Works, vol. 18 (Concordia, 1975), p. 401

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